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## UN, religious leaders promote exclusive breastfeeding in Indonesia



A mother breastfeeds her baby

21 December 2010 – Faced with a marked decrease in exclusive breastfeeding in Indonesia, the United Nations has teamed up with Government and religious leaders to promote a practice that is proven to protect newborns and infants from disease, illness and impaired development.

As Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, commemorates national Mothers' Day this week, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu leaders pledged at a conference led by the Ministries of Health and Religious Affairs to develop an action plan with their clerics to spread key information about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months.

“Religious leaders have the power to persuade their followers about the importance of breastfeeding, a simple life-saving practice that is referred to in all the Holy Scripts including the Quran, the Bible, the Vedas and the Tripitaka,” UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) Representative Angela Kearney [said](#).

“The health of the nation is dependent upon a shared vision and shared action that can only come through practical partnerships... Every religion accepts a responsibility to guide its followers, to show wisdom and foresight in enabling people to make the right choices in life. Today, we are focusing on a critical health issue, where our collective voices can offer life-saving guidance to families.”

Rates of exclusive breastfeeding in Indonesia have fallen from 40 per cent in 2002, with less than one-third of infants now being breastfed in line with global standards in the first six months of life. Data also shows that nearly one in every five Indonesian children under the age of five is underweight, and many children suffer from other nutrition-related problems such as stunting.

Promoting improved nutrition practices are therefore seen as essential to tackling these alarming child development indicators.

The UN World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) stresses “with full confidence that breastfeeding reduces child mortality and has health benefits that extend into adulthood,” recommending exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, followed by continued breastfeeding with appropriate complementary foods for up to two years or beyond.

WHO underscores that as the natural first food for babies, breast milk provides all the energy and nutrients an infant needs for the first months of life, up to half or more of a child’s nutritional needs during the second half of the first year, and up to one-third during the second year of life.

Exclusive breastfeeding promotes sensory and cognitive development, protects against infectious and chronic diseases, reduces infant mortality due to common childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea or pneumonia, and helps for a quicker recovery during illness.

It contributes to the health and well-being of mothers, it helps to space children, reduces the risk of ovarian cancer and breast cancer, increases family and national resources, is a secure way of feeding and is safe for the environment.

UNICEF and WHO recommend the start of breastfeeding within the first hour of life; exclusive breastfeeding – that is, without any additional food or drink, not even water – for the first six months; breastfeeding on demand – that is, as often as the child wants, day and night – and no use of bottles or pacifiers.

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[UN agencies issue 10 tips for successful breastfeeding](#)